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U.S. Farm Security Admin'n.

THE LOW-COST RURAL HOUSING PROGRAM  
OF THE  
FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

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U. S. Department of Agriculture

Although the Farm Security Administration is not primarily a housing agency, it has found it necessary to undertake some housing activity. The chief function of this agency, formerly the Resettlement Administration, is to help farm families on or near relief to become permanently self-supporting. In some cases it has been necessary to help such families relocate themselves from submarginal lands to good farms where they have a chance to attain a decent standard of living.

In connection with this resettlement work, the Farm Security Administration is building 119 projects designed to accommodate approximately 10,000 families. Some of these projects are small rural communities with their own schools and stores and utilities; others are subsistence homesteads projects intended to afford part-time farming opportunities to families employed in nearby industry; and the remainder are groups of scattered farmsteads.

In addition, the Farm Security Administration is building three suburban "greenbelt" communities near Washington, D. C., Cincinnati, and Milwaukee. These towns, each of which will accommodate from 550 to 885 families, were designed to demonstrate both the intelligent use of land in suburban areas and a new type of community planning, combining the conveniences of the city with many of the advantages of rural life.

Construction of many of these projects was started under the pressure of a national emergency to provide speedy employment for thousands of men on the relief rolls. They were undertaken by a hastily-assembled organization, of which much of the personnel was unfamiliar with Federal procedure. For these reasons, the cost of constructing some of the earliest homes was undesirably high.

When the Resettlement Administration was incorporated in the Department of Agriculture on January 1, 1937, immediate steps were taken to reduce construction costs to an absolute minimum. It was determined that the construction cost of rural homes should be limited to between \$1200 and \$2100, and that of an entire farm unit, including outbuildings, to between \$2900 and \$4200. The lower cost units are being built in the southern states and the higher cost units in the north, where greater insulation and weather protection is necessary. All buildings are of the highest quality of construction and with reasonable maintenance should last considerably longer than the period required to amortize their cost.

In general, these homes are being built for as little as \$250 a room without bath, and for approximately \$400 a room with bath.

Barns cost from \$450 to \$1800, depending on the number of animals to be housed and the amount of feed to be stored. The more expensive barns are being built in northern states for use by dairymen. Some variation from these limits has been permitted in a few cases to meet special local conditions.



These low costs were achieved in two ways:

1. Simplification of Design.

Architects and builders have worked out scientific plans and specifications to give the maximum amount of space and utility for a minimum expenditure. Every unnecessary gable, beam and rafter has been eliminated, and there are no purely decorative features. Standard materials and sizes are used throughout.

2. Mass Production Methods

All buildings were carefully designed to make possible a large degree of pre-cutting and pre-fabricating. For example, it has been found possible to set up an inexpensive portable sawmill on a project site and to cut the lumber for a large number of houses to exact specifications. Trucks then deliver these pieces to the building site where they can be speedily nailed together. Complicated parts of the house, such as window and door frames, are prefabricated at the mill, so that they can be installed with the minimum of labor. A home, for example, can be completed in a week and a poultry house or smokehouse can be put up in less than half an hour.

Even forms for pouring concrete foundations are made at the mill. Painted inside with creosote before each pouring, they can be used six or seven times.

Precutting at the sawmill takes only about one-sixth the time which would be required for cutting with handsaws on the building site. It also assures machine precision, and makes possible more uniform supervision. Selection of stock is simplified, permitting the use of odds and ends of lumber which ordinarily would go on the scrap-heap.

These methods make it possible to use relatively unskilled rural relief labor, without lowering standards of workmanship. Wherever possible, the homes are being built by the people who later will live in them; they have every reason therefore to keep labor costs low.

All buildings, with the exception of a few adobe houses, are of frame construction, since buildings of this type are best adapted to the pre-cutting technique. The best quality of materials is used throughout.

The simplest type of interior finishing is being utilized. In the south, interior walls usually are made of vertical tongue-and-groove sheathing. In the north, plastered interior walls and weatherboard exteriors have been found necessary to cope with more severe weather conditions. The ceilings of northern houses are insulated, while the roof peaks of southern houses are vented to permit a maximum circulation of air.

During the summer of 1937 contracts were let to private builders for the construction of 1,600 units, usually in areas in which similar homes were being built by the FSA under government force account. In general

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the direct field cost of construction by Government force account was equal to or slightly less than the cost under private contract. The Construction Division of the FSA has built up a decentralized administrative organization, under which complete responsibility for each project is delegated to a resident engineer.

As of January 1, 1938, approximately 3,370 of the 10,000 units had been completed. Experience gained from these beginnings indicates that the low-cost housing program can provide homes and farm buildings at a cost low enough for amortization within a reasonable period by the families which the FSA is rehabilitating.

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